

## THE END AND THE BEGINNING

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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At a ceremony on Tuesday of this past week, 301 newly-trained firefighters graduated from the Fire Department of New York's firefighting academy. According to an article in the Wall Street Journal, the graduates included 19 children of FDNY members who were killed in the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks or died from 9/11-related illnesses. FDNY Commissioner Daniel Nigro said of these legacy graduates, "They are honoring their fallen loved ones, they are continuing their families' legacy of service, and making all of us immensely proud."

One of the new firefighters is 27-year-old Rebecca Asaro, who graduated from the academy along with her younger brother Marc. Their two older siblings, Matthew and Carl, are already city firefighters.

Their father, Carl Asaro, was also a firefighter. He spent 14 years as part of Ladder 4 in midtown. On 9/11, he was killed at Ground Zero at the age of 39.

Reflecting on the difficult months and years that followed her father's death, Rebecca Asaro says that the other firefighters from her father's unit rallied around the family to help out, steadfastly supporting them with their time and even their money. We couldn't have made it through without them, she says.

As she joins the ranks of the city's firefighters along with her three brothers, Rebecca says, "It's a lot of emotions. It's a big accomplishment. We all stuck together and got by."

Three days before 9/11, on September 8, 2001, my wife Holly and I attended the Bar Mitzvah of a young man whose parents are friends of ours. For the benefit of those in attendance who were not Jewish, the officiating rabbi explained that under Jewish law, children are not obligated to observe the commandments, although they are encouraged to study and learn the obligations they will someday have as adults. But at the age of thirteen (twelve for girls), the obligation to follow the commandments falls upon children as well. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony formally marks the assumption of that obligation, along with the corresponding right to take part in leading religious services. But, the rabbi said, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony is not required to confer these rights and obligations. They come automatically when you become a grownup.

Near the end of the service, the rabbi stood before Ben and addressed him directly concerning what it means to be a grownup. The rabbi talked about how Ben stands in a long line of faithful people — not just the ones described in the Hebrew Bible, but also his grandparents, who risked their lives to rescue fellow Jews from the clutches of the Nazis, and his parents, who had passed on the tradition with dedication

and love. “Now Ben, it’s your turn,” said the rabbi. “Your task in life as a grownup is to be a good ancestor to those who will follow after you.”

Three days later, the world changed — for Ben and for the rest of us as well. We all suddenly became grownups in a way we hadn’t been before. The Sunday after 9/11, we gathered in the sanctuary here at All Souls – more than 1,100 of us in the second service alone – to mourn our devastating losses and reassure each other that not everything had fallen down or fallen apart. The following evening, we gathered again to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, as we will once again this evening. Which is why, for me, the commemoration of 9/11 and the celebration of Rosh Hashanah will always be linked in memory.

In different ways, both identify the end of something: in the case of 9/11, the end of what, in a different context, the poet William Blake called an age of innocence, and in the case of Rosh Hashanah, the end of a year that has passed. Both also identify the beginning of something: the beginning of what Blake called the age of experience, and what the Jewish tradition calls a new year. The hinge of history: an end and the beginning.

Over the past couple of weeks, especially during the commemorations of 9/11 and the lead-up to the Jewish High Holy Days, a poem by the Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska has been circling through my mind. Born in 1923 in a small town in Poland, she lived her entire life from age six in Krakow. With Hitler savaging Poland during her teens and Stalin serving as its overlord during her twenties, she experienced a full measure of the twentieth century’s turmoil and tragedy; as well as, in her later years, its potential for change and renewal.

As major poets go, Szymborska wrote relatively few poems, and she mostly shunned the public eye. But her trenchant observations of life and politics, distilled in her poetry, make her writings an essential companion in times like these.

In her poem titled “The End and the Beginning,” she writes:

After every war  
someone has to clean up.  
Things won’t  
straighten themselves up, after all...

Someone must drag in a girder  
to prop up a wall.  
Someone must glaze a window,  
rehang a door.

Photogenic it’s not,  
and takes years.  
All the cameras have left for another war.

Again we'll need bridges  
and new railway stations.  
Sleeves will go ragged  
from rolling them up.

Someone, broom in hand,  
still recalls how it was...  
Yet others milling about  
already find it dull...

Those who knew  
what was going on here  
must give way to  
those who know little.  
And less than little.  
And finally as little as nothing.

In the grass which has overgrown  
causes and effects,  
someone must be stretched out,  
blade of grass in mouth,  
gazing at the clouds.

Rosh Hashanah, on these terms, encourages us to come to terms with the past — to clean up and straighten up — and make a new beginning. We need to give time an opportunity to overgrow the causes and effects of the past, and give ourselves a chance to chart the potential of the future. Especially when we've been devastated by tragedy or bedeviled by our own shortcomings, this can be a difficult transition to make.

But, over the years, we have found a way to live in a post-9/11 world. The 18-year-olds heading off to college this fall were born after the towers fell. Even for those of us who remember 9/11 with distressing clarity, most of us can go long stretches of time — certainly days, and sometimes even weeks — without even thinking about that terrible day. We've somehow grown accustomed to a world where some people devote themselves to doing us harm — and on purpose.

Even so, we've learned to turn away from the past and face the future, in part because we've learned from the history of the Jews. As we approach the beginning of Rosh Hashanah at sundown this evening, even those of us who are not Jewish can find comfort in a tradition of faith and faithfulness that has endured for hundreds of generations and thousands of years. It has survived not only the vicissitudes of time and

chance, but also persecution and Diaspora, the horrors of holocaust and myriad changes in fashion and fidelity.

Why? Because the Jews have demonstrated that the fall from innocence into experience can be reversed. No matter what has happened in the past, no matter how deeply we have been devastated by tragedy or how profoundly we have failed ourselves and those we love, we can nonetheless chart a different future.

As it happens, the original meaning of the word “innocent” actually had nothing to do with lack of guilt. In one of his essays on medicine, the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates says that when physicians are treating disease, they should “make a habit of two things: to help, or at least to do no harm.” Translated into Latin, the phrase “to do no harm” became “non nocere,” which is the root of our word “innocent.” To be innocent is to be unharmed, or more generally, to be complete or whole.

No matter how much we have been harmed in the past, we can find healing in the future. No matter how broken we have felt in the past, we can discover wholeness in the future. We can mark the end and make a new beginning. The causes and the effects of the past can eventually be overgrown.

By coming to terms with all that is past, we open ourselves to all that is possible. That’s the promise of the Rosh Hashanah. And that’s the promise we claim for ourselves today.

As long as we live, the gift of each new day brings us another chance. We can forgive ourselves and others — not by papering over our failures in the past or their consequences in the present, but by living differently in the future. The problems of the past can only be redeemed by our actions in the future.

Along the way, we glean new knowledge about ourselves and gain new insights into our world. We develop new relationships with the people around us and deepen our existing relationships with the natural world. We see ourselves more clearly and our world more compassionately.

In this sense, today marks a completely new chance to advance toward becoming the kind of people we could become. Again today, we have an opportunity to accept the necessities of the past and to engage the possibilities of the future. We have a chance to help create the kind of future for ourselves and our world that we could create.

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. No matter what has gone before, today presents you with a new and unique opportunity, one that has never come before and will never appear again. Make the most of it.